

Priscilla as we've read is mentioned quite a lot in the NT (Acts 18:1-3, 18-19, 26; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Timothy 3:15). Priscilla is always mentioned in conjunction with her husband Aquila, indeed in Acts she's mentioned first four of the six times they are mentioned indicating that she was a more important figure than her husband. Paul initially met this couple in Corinth and they left Corinth with Paul and travelled with him to Ephesus, staying on when Paul left. Priscilla and Aquila soon encountered a Jew named Apollos, who was an eloquent speaker but only knew the baptism of repentance of John the Baptist. They took Apollos aside and "explained to him the way of God more accurately" which indicates that Priscilla was a knowledgeable gospel teacher. This also indicates that women were permitted to teach and have authority in the early church.

Clearly Priscilla and Aquila became lifelong friends of Paul. They were a support to Paul in his ministry, offered him their home and had the occupation of tentmaking in common. Paul supported himself as a tentmaker during the first part of his ministry in Corinth. Paul was able to leave them in Ephesus to support his mission there when he left Ephesus to continue his missionary journey.

Paul greets or send greetings from Priscilla and Aquila in several of his epistles.

In Romans 16 Paul says:

"Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow-workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them." (Romans 16:3-4 NIV)

In 1 Corinthians 16:19 Paul says that Priscilla and Aquila have a church which meets at their house.

In 2 Timothy 4:19 Paul sends them greetings via Timothy indicating that they are still in Ephesus.

Women in scripture is a huge topic – I did a whole Teaching Morning on this last year and I didn't have time to go into depth then – so I'm only going to be able to scratch the surface of the subject this morning.

Let me start with one or two quotes:

"What women these Christians have!"

—*4th-century pagan philosopher Libanius*

"Many women have received power through the grace of God and have performed many deeds of manly valour."

—*Clement of Alexandria*

"She was in the front line in condemning the heretics."

—*Jerome, on Marcella*

"A woman, however learned and holy, may not take upon herself to teach in an assembly of men."

—*the Synod of Carthage, 398 A.D.*

“You are the Devil’s gateway; you are the unsealer of that tree; you are the first forsaker of the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the Devil was not brave enough to approach!”

—*Tertullian, to women*

“When [the women] came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven.... But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense.”

—*Luke 24:9–11*

“These people do not know that while Barak trembled, Deborah saved Israel, that Esther delivered from supreme peril the children of God ... Is it not to women that our Lord appeared after His Resurrection? Yes, and the men could then blush for not having sought what the women had found.”

—*Jerome, after criticism for dedicating his books to women*

Plunging in to my subject, I believe that Genesis makes it clear that men and women were originally created equal but that this was modified after what is usually known as the Fall.

“To the woman he said, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.” To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat of it,’ “Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life.” (Genesis 3:16-17 NIV)

The woman’s penalty impacts her two main roles, child bearing and her relationship with her husband. As regards the latter, husband and wife would no longer co-exist in an equal covenant relationship, but rather the man would rule over the woman. I think this arises from the fact that the woman acted independently of the man in sinning, so now she will be dependant upon her husband – although some scholars argue that this dependant role is merely a consequence of the relationship having been corrupted by sin. Of course, it’s absolutely fundamental here that God is speaking of husbands and wives, and saying that the husband shall rule over the wife. This is not a blanket authority for every man to rule over all women. I think it does imply that a male headship role over women will generally be appropriate, especially in relation to married women, but it is far, far short of an absolute command for all women to be subject to all men. Also this male rule is to be a gentle loving rule not harsh domination.

Some feminists have argued that the New Covenant in Christ has changed this, but I don’t think that’s correct. When Paul writes in Galatians:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28 NIV)

he’s talking about our equality in salvation, not equality in this life. Paul writes quite a lot about the role of women in his epistles and we don’t have time to go through this in detail, but in summary what I believe is the correct scriptural position is that firstly, women are to be submissive to their husbands – who are to treat them lovingly – in a way that is honouring to God. In this way both husbands and wives honour God and his purposes for us. As we’ve already said, that doesn’t mean that women are to be doormats, but it does mean that they should recognise and acquiesce in a role of male leadership by their husbands and husbands must exercise that role lovingly and wisely for the benefit of their wives and indeed the whole family. *Male chauvinism is no more biblical than feminism.* Both are perversions of God’s plan. Secondly, wives are to demonstrate their submission in their role in the church. They can teach and preach, but should not take a leadership role over their husbands – or possibly

even men at all, although the existence of Priscilla and the female apostle Junia (Romans 16:7) rather weighs against that viewpoint. Thirdly, they should dress and conduct themselves in a modest way which is fully in accordance with the norms for modest women in the culture of the time and which doesn't portray them as immodest or as feminist rebels.

Jesus included women where Jewish piety largely excluded them. Women were excluded from active participation in synagogue worship and only allowed to have a spectator role. They were forbidden to enter the Temple beyond the Court of the Women. A woman was not allowed to touch the scrolls of the Scriptures, lest she defile them. A man was not supposed to talk much with a woman, even his wife. Speaking to a woman in public was subject to even greater restrictions.

Jesus largely set aside such discrimination. He astonished His disciples by talking openly with "a woman" and a Samaritan woman – just to make things even more scandalous – at Jacob's well (John 4:27). His dearest friends included women, for example Mary and Martha from Bethany and Mary Magdalene. There were many women who were part of his band of followers, following Him from Galilee to Golgotha (Mark 15:41) and who supported his ministry (Luke 8:1-3):

"After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means." (Lu 8:1-3 NIV)

This would have been absolutely scandalous in those times, women didn't travel around on their own with a band of men.

Having already affirmed Martha by accepting her invitation to dinner, He affirmed Mary's choice of sitting at His feet to hear Him teach (Luke 10:39). He did not question her right or competence to hear His word, but rather commended her for choosing what was better, declaring that "it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42). Many have sought to take from women like Mary precisely what Jesus affirmed as rightfully theirs.

The story of the anointing of Jesus by "a woman who had lived a sinful life" is amazing (Luke 7:36–50). She showered her love and gratitude upon Jesus, and He affirmed her and her act. Without a hint of impropriety, Jesus let this woman thus touch Him and express her feelings toward Him. The pious Pharisees were scandalized that Jesus let her do this, and would have forbidden it even if the woman had been "good" and not "a sinner."

Equally amazing is the story of the woman with an issue of blood who touched Jesus (Mark 5:25-34). According to Jewish Law, a woman with an issue of blood was "unclean," defiling everyone and everything she touched (Leviticus 15:19-33). Had Jesus followed this code, He would have denounced the woman for touching Him and demanded her punishment. Instead, Jesus had her stand up and openly identify herself; and then He publicly affirmed her: "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering." (Mark 5:34). As the fulfilment of the Law Jesus was able to override the requirements of the Law when he believed it was appropriate.

In his teaching, Jesus also rejected the double standard for marriage, divorce and adultery. He put marriage and divorce in new perspective in answering the question, "Is it lawful for a

man to divorce his wife?” (Mark 10:2). It would never have occurred to His questioners to ask, “Is it lawful for a wife to divorce her husband?” Under Jewish law, a wife could not divorce her husband. Jesus rejected the fallacy that adultery is a sin against the husband only, he taught that adultery can be committed against a woman as well as against a man.

Jesus made women the first witnesses to his resurrection – absolutely amazing in a society where the testimony of a woman was not admissible in court.

So what about women in the early church. Well we’ve already looked at Priscilla who played a very important role and mentioned Junia who Paul states was an apostle:

“Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.” (Ro 16:7 NIV)

The NIV, I believe wrongly, renders her name in the male for Junias. Most other Bible versions such as the AV, the NKJV, the REB and the ESV render it in the female form Junia. All the early manuscripts and commentators down to the 12th century use the female form, but in the medieval period scribes introduced the male form Junias because they didn’t believe a woman could have been an apostle, especially an apostle recognised by Paul. Along with the majority of modern scholars I believe they were wrong and that Junia is indeed a woman.

So the very early church appears to have fully recognised women in ministry.

In the 2nd century, Clement of Alexandria wrote that the apostles were accompanied on their missionary journeys by women who were not marriage partners, but colleagues:

“that they might be their fellow-ministers in dealing with housewives. It was through them that the Lord’s teaching penetrated also the women’s quarters without any scandal being aroused. We also know the directions about women deacons which are given by the noble Paul in his letter to Timothy.”

Twice Ignatius sent greetings to Alce, whom he calls especially dear to him. He also greeted Tavia and her household; perhaps she was another house-church leader. Polycarp mentioned the sister of Crescens, who deserved special commendation when she and her brother arrived in Philippi to deliver the letter. *The Shepherd of Hermas*, written about 148 A.D., gives instructions that two copies should be made of the work and one given to Grapte, “who shall exhort the widows and orphans.” The other copy was to be given to Bishop Clement to share with the elders. It appears that Grapte and Clement represented the female and male leaders respectively.

Indeed Christians were not the only ones prompted to write about the female followers of Jesus. About 112 A.D., the Roman governor Pliny the Younger detailed his efforts to cope with the nascent church in Bithynia. He had found it necessary to interrogate the leaders, two slave women called *ministrae*, or deacons.

There are even a few scattered references connecting women to the priesthood. Pseudo-Ignatius’s *Letter to the Tarsians* commands that those who continue in virginity be honored as priestesses of Christ. The elders of Titus 2:3 must be “*hieroprepeis*,” a term that inscriptional evidence suggests should be translated “like a priestess,” or “like those employed in sacred service.”

In my opinion the exclusion of women from ministry within the church is a late practice which probably began in the 3rd century with the *Didascalia*, a church order dating to the middle of the third century. The earlier *Didache* is silent on the issue of women in ministry. As the church gathered power, culminating in it becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine, so the issue of the power of women within the ministry of the church became more important and women were gradually excluded from ministry within the church. A situation which has only recently been rectified. Along with Karen Torjesen¹ I think it is likely that this change of attitude in the third century resulted from the activities of the church increasingly moving from the private sphere into the public sphere. In Greco-Roman society women had quite a free hand in the private sphere, but were severely restricted in their activities in the public sphere.

In conclusion then, it would seem that women had an active and effective ministry in the early church during the first and second centuries AD, but were increasingly excluded from ministry starting in the third century AD. This is a situation which has only recently been rectified.

¹ Karen Torjesen *The Neglected History of Women in the Early Church* p29